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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the increasing incidence of divorce and unwed parenthood in the United States, arguing that the "divorce revolution" of the last several decades has created terrible hardships for children, generated poverty within families, and burdened the nation with unsupportable social costs. It calls for a fundamental shift in cultural values and public policy that: (1) reclaims the ideal of marital permanence and affirms marriage as the preeminent environment for childbearing; (2) decides unequivocally that out-of-wedlock childbearing is wrong, that the divorce rate is too high, and that every child deserves a father; (3) resolves in the next generation to increase the proportion of children who grow up with their two married parents and decrease the proportion who do not; and (4) resolves in the next generation to increase the time that parents spend raising their children, with married couples aiming for an overall commitment to paid employment that does not exceed 60 hours per week. It provides specific actions that clergy, civic leaders, employers, social workers, health care professionals, legislators, and the entertainment industry can take to advance these goals. (Contains 35 references.) (MDM)

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MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

A Report to the Nation

ED 383 446

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Council on Families in America

March 1995

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The art reproductions and accompanying texts presented in this report are works of school children in the New York City area depicting their images of family life. The paintings are part of Children's Voices, *a project sponsored by the National Parenting Association with the help of the United Federation of Teachers and the New York City Art Teachers Association/UFT. The project was primarily funded by the American Express Foundation, Scholastic Inc., Showtime Networks, and Toys "R" Us. The National Parenting Association is a New York-based national non-profit membership organization devoted to supporting parents and families.*

Cover:

Drowning Love
How I See Myself as a Parent

I 99% think I wouldn't be a good parent because I really do not want to be anyone's mother. In my picture, the parent is so vague.

However, in the picture I did show myself handcuffed, like a prisoner. as a parent, I would be a prisoner because when you're someone's mother you receive a lot of responsibility along with it. The golden bubble is to show the innocence of the children. The aura of blue-green is to show resentment, me having the "blue's." The black background represents "darkness," the darkness that surrounds my life.

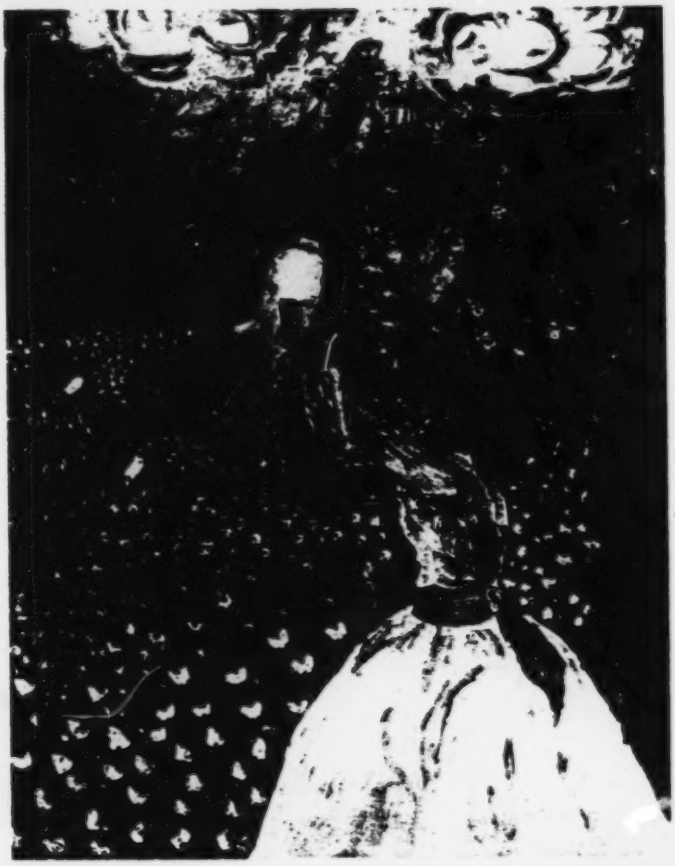
E.A., girl, 9th grade, Brooklyn

MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

Executive Summary

The divorce revolution — the steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed parenthood — has failed. It has created terrible hardships for children, incurred unsupportable social costs, and failed to deliver on its promise of greater adult happiness. The time has come to shift the focus of national attention from divorce to marriage and to rebuild a family culture based on enduring marital relationships.

Making marriage in America stronger will require a fundamental shift in cultural values and public policy. No one sector of society is responsible for the decline of marriage. We are all part of the problem, and therefore we all must be part of the solution. We must reclaim the ideal of marital permanence and recognize that out-of-wedlock childbearing does harm. Our goal for the next generation should be to increase the proportion of children who grow up with their two married parents and decrease the proportion who do not. Possible strategies for regaining a marriage culture are addressed to each major sector of society.



Left:

Maternal Love

This painting expresses the way I feel about my future with my child. I want my child to be happy and I want her to love me the same way I love her. In that way we will have a good relationship so that nobody will be able to take us apart. I wanted this picture to be alive, that is why I used a lot of bright colors.

D.T., girl, 11th grade, Brooklyn

Right:

How I See Myself as a Mother (She)

In the painting there are four characters. The woman in the front is me. The two kids are my children (boy and girl). The legs behind me is my husband reading a newspaper. In the picture I am tied up. My children did that. They are crazy, they have a lot of energy and they love to do a lot of crazy things. In this picture I am in a fancy dress, because I am still young and pretty. However, the kids always make me busy and tired. My husband seems like he doesn't care and it's true. All he needs is to read his newspaper, while the kids kill me.

J.F., girl, 10th grade, Brooklyn

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MARRIAGE IN AMERICA
A Report to the Nation

The Failed Revolution

America's divorce revolution has failed.

The evidence of failure is overwhelming. The divorce revolution — by which we mean the steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed parenthood — has created terrible hardships for children. It has generated poverty within families. It has burdened us with unsupportable social costs. It has failed to deliver on its promise of greater adult happiness and better relationships between men and women.

We do not offer this assessment lightly. We recognize that these failures have been unanticipated and unintended. The divorce revolution set out to achieve some worthy social goals: to foster greater equality between men and women; to improve the family lives of women; and to expand individual happiness and choice. We recognize the enduring importance of these social goals.

Yet the divorce revolution has not brought us closer to these goals but has cast us at greater distance from them. Relationships between men and women are not getting better: by many measures, they are getting worse. They are becoming more difficult, fragile, and unhappy. Too many women are experiencing chronic economic insecurity. Too many men are isolated and estranged from their children. Too many people are lonely and unconnected. Too many children are angry, sad, and neglected.

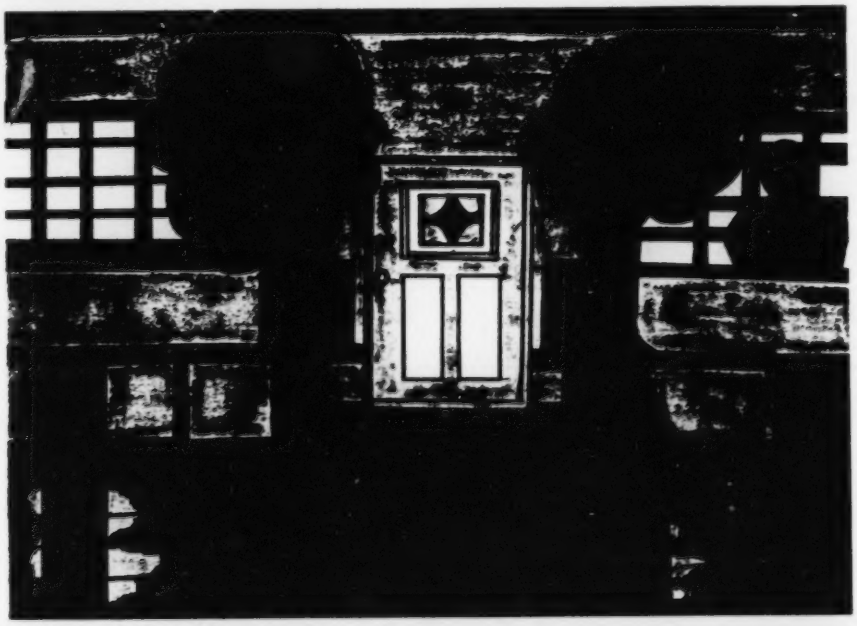
We believe it is time to change course. The promises of the divorce revolution proved empty, its consequences devastating for both adults and children. It is time to shift the focus of national attention from divorce to marriage. It is time to rebuild a family culture based on enduring marital relationships.

Changing the Subject to Marriage

We are scholars and analysts who make up the Council on Families in America — a volunteer, nonpartisan, interdisciplinary group of citizens from across the human sciences and across the political spectrum. We are a diverse group, reflecting a wide range of opinions about politics, philosophy, and public policy.*

What brings us together is our concern for children. This concern leads us to focus on the state of marriage

* The opinions in this report are those of the Council members as individuals and not necessarily of the organizations with which they are affiliated.



Right:

Parenting

Although it sometimes hurts a great deal, some members of a family have to say goodbye.

Leaving a parent behind is like cutting out part of your life.

A.C., boy, 12th grade, Brooklyn

and family life in America. Over the past two years we have commissioned and reviewed scholarly papers, conducted and monitored research, closely followed the national debate, and deliberated together.

We esteem tolerance and privacy as basic values. In a free society, people should be permitted to live in social arrangements over which they have a measure of choice and control. But we also point to this central fact: today there is widespread and growing evidence of failure in rearing children. Accordingly, it is vitally important to uphold those institutions and values which are most likely to meet children's needs and safeguard their interests.

We as a society are simply failing to teach the next generation about the meaning, purposes, and responsibilities of marriage. If this trend continues, it will constitute nothing less than an act of cultural suicide.

The truth is that every child needs and deserves the love and provision of a mother and a father. The loving two-married-parent family is the best environment for children — the place where children gain the identity, discipline, and moral education that are essential for their full individual development. And, as the institution which most effectively teaches the civic virtues of honesty, loyalty, trust, self-sacrifice, personal responsibility, and respect for others, the family is an irreplaceable foundation for long-term social efficacy and responsibility.

The weight of evidence points to a most disturbing reality. Child well-being is deteriorating. Almost all of the key indicators point toward this conclusion: rates of delinquency and crime (including an alarming juvenile homicide rate), drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, depression, the growing number of children in poverty, and others. Some experts have suggested that the current generation of children and youth is the first in our nation's history to be less well-off — psychologically, socially, economically, and morally — than their parents were at the same age.

Many factors have contributed to the deteriorating well-being of children. But what ranks as the most fundamental factor of all, in our judgment, is *the weakening of marriage as an institution.*

Marriage is under assault in our society. It is an institution in decline and even disrepute. The eminent demographer Kingsley Davis has said, "at no time in history, with the possible exception of Imperial Rome, has the institution of marriage been more problematic than it is today."[1]

With each passing year, an ever smaller percentage of the nation's citizens are married and an ever larger percentage of the nation's children live in households that do not consist of two married parents. This steady break-up of the married, mother-father childrearing unit is the principle cause of declining child well-being in our society.*

Moreover, with each passing year, more and more American children are growing up with little or no direct experience of married life. Many are growing up with little or no confidence that they could be, or even want to be, in a satisfying, enduring marital relationship. Increasingly, the cultural messages the children receive are either indifferent or hostile to marriage. Indeed, it does not seem at all far-fetched to say that we as a society are simply failing to teach the next generation about the meaning, purposes, and responsibilities of marriage. If this trend continues, it will constitute nothing less than an act of cultural suicide.

Unless we reverse the decline of marriage, no other achievements will be powerful enough to reverse the trend of declining child well-being.

The core message of this report is basic and blunt. To reverse the current deterioration of child and societal well-being in the United States, we must strengthen the institution of marriage. We realize that strengthening marriage cannot be our only goal. But we insist that it must become our most important goal. For unless we reverse the decline of marriage, no other achievements — no tax cut, no new government program, no new idea — will be powerful enough to reverse the trend of declining child well-being.

We are not suggesting a return to the marriage forms of earlier eras. We endorse a marriage form which puts children first and is based on a full sense of mutuality and equal regard between husband and wife. We call for

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* We recognize that some single parents, against difficult odds, are successfully raising their children and they deserve our support. And some married couples are failing at the task.

the nation to commit itself to this overriding goal: *To increase the proportion of children who grow up with their two married parents and decrease the proportion of children who do not.*

Many Americans will agree with this goal; some will not. But even those who do not agree, we trust, will acknowledge that our current national debate has been curiously silent on the subject of marriage. Who, today, is still promoting marriage? Who is even talking about it? In place of a national debate about what has happened to marriage there has been silence — stone-cold silence.

We increasingly accept as normal widespread reports of teenage pregnancies, absent fathers, neglected and abused children, child poverty, delinquent and violent teenagers. The nation is willing to debate each of these topics. But where is the debate about the common denominator that lies behind them all — the decline of marriage? The issue has hardly emerged on our public agenda. It is time to end this remarkable national silence on what is surely one of the most important issues of our time.

A primary purpose of this report, then, is to urge our society to switch the topic. Our society's current topic might be termed managing family decline, or ameliorating some of the worst consequences of a divorce culture. This discussion — in which many of us have participated and will continue to participate — is still necessary but no longer sufficient. It is time to raise the stakes, raise our standards, and begin a new discussion. The new discussion will be less about symptoms and problems than about causes and solutions. The new discussion we propose might be termed recreating a marriage culture.

The Decline of Child Well-Being

The deterioration of child well-being over the past three decades is one of our most tragic domestic trends. Moreover, when one stops to think about it, the trend in many ways should be quite surprising. No one could have predicted it 30 years ago. Today we are much richer than ever before and richer than any society in world history. Since 1960, the Gross Domestic Product has nearly tripled and the average income of Americans has doubled (in inflation-adjusted dollars). This prosperity has directly benefited children. Between 1964 and 1979 the income supporting the average pre-school-age child in America increased (in inflation-adjusted dollars) by 42 percent.[2]

These per-child economic gains stem from several factors. Americans are having fewer children and they are having them later in life, when incomes are higher. In addition, many more mothers have entered the labor force. Not only do children have more money available to them,* but they also have had more adults available who could, at least theoretically, care for them. The proportion of adults to children has jumped from fewer than two adults for every child in 1960 to a current ratio of 3 to 1.[3]

The most important causal factor of declining child well-being is the remarkable collapse of marriage, leading to growing family instability and decreasing parental investment in children.

Consider also these additional changes. Over the past three decades, the health of the nation improved, at least as measured by the key rates of infant mortality and longevity; money spent on education increased dramatically, with total expenditures on public elementary and secondary school education more than doubling in inflation-adjusted dollars; a new emphasis on children's rights emerged; informed psychological advice about childrearing was nationally promulgated as never before; and we witnessed the rise of the "new father," the man who is more directly involved with housework and the care of children.

Nevertheless, child well-being has not improved. It has gotten worse — much worse. A nonpartisan commission of prominent political, medical, education, and business leaders issued a report in 1990 on the health and well-being of American teenagers. They concluded: "never before has one generation of American teen-agers been less healthy, less cared for, or less prepared for life than their parents were at the same age."[4] The bipartisan National Commission on Children, chaired by Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, concluded in 1991 that "substantial evidence suggests that the quality of life for many of America's children has declined."[5]

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* We are aware that, underneath this broad economic trend, many blue-collar workers, beginning in the early 1970s, have experienced wage stagnation and even wage decline. In addition, we are aware of the declining economic prospects facing poorly educated young men, especially minority men.

Left:

Parents

Me alone in the park...
All alone in the park.
My Dad and Mom are divorced
that's why I'm alone.

Below:

Parents (Future)

This is me in the picture with my son.
We are taking a walk in the park.
I will never be like my father.
I will never divorce my wife and kid.

A.M., boy, 4th grade, Bronx

What is the evidence for declining child well-being? Here are some examples.

- Juvenile violent crime has increased sixfold, from 16,000 arrests in 1960 to 96,000 in 1992, a period in which the total number of juveniles in the population remained relatively stable.
- Reports of child neglect and abuse have quintupled since 1976, when data were first collected. Confirmed reports of child neglect and abuse have also increased significantly.
- The psychological pathology of children and youth has taken a drastic turn for the worse. Eating disorders and rates of unipolar depression have soared among adolescent girls. Teen suicide has tripled. Alcohol and drug abuse among teenagers, although leveling off in recent years, continues at a very high rate.
- SAT scores have declined nearly 80 points, and most of the decline cannot be accounted for by the increasing academic diversity of students taking the test.
- Poverty has shifted from the elderly to the young. Since 1970, the percent of children who are poor has increased from 15 percent to 22 percent. Today, 38 percent of the nation's poor are children.

Is it merely a coincidence that child well-being declined sharply during a period of time in which marriage also declined? We think not. The rate of child poverty, for example, is fives times higher for children living with single mothers than for children in intact families.[6] As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan has noted, poverty has historically derived from unemployment and low wages; today it derives from family structure.[7]

Recent surveys have found that children from broken homes, when they become teenagers, have 2 to 3 times more behavioral and psychological problems than do children from intact homes.[8] Of juveniles and young adults serving in long-term correctional facilities, 70 percent did not live with both parents while growing up.[9] Broken-home backgrounds contribute to as many as 3 in 4 teen suicides and 4 in 5 psychiatric admissions.[10]

The fragmentation of family structure extends far beyond the bounds of race, class, and ethnicity, but it can be seen most dramatically within the African-American community.[11] Today, 68 percent of all black births are to unmarried mothers. Two-thirds of all black children are not living with two parents. And consider these economic consequences: only 15 percent of black children living with their married parents are in poverty, compared to 57 percent of those living with their mother only.[12]

The evidence continues to mount, and it points to one striking conclusion: the weakening of marriage has had devastating consequences for the well-being of children. To be sure, television, the movies, and popular music contribute to declining child well-being. So do poor teaching, the loss of skilled jobs, inefficient government bureaucracies, meagre or demeaning welfare programs,

and the availability of guns and drugs. But by far the most important causal factor is the remarkable collapse of marriage, leading to growing family instability and decreasing parental investment in children.

The Decline of Marriage

Not so long ago, America was probably the most marrying society in the world. The effects of that era can still be seen in the older generation. In 1990, 95 percent of women and 94 percent of men ages 45 to 54 either were or had been married.[13]

Today, marriage is an institution in decay. Despite the fact that in recent years the number of marriages has been at record highs because of large population cohorts at the most marriageable ages, the marriage rate has been steadily declining. More people are postponing marriage to older ages, and more people are foregoing marriage altogether. The marriage rate for unmarried women ages 15 to 44 began to plummet around 1975 and by 1988 reached an all-time low of 91.0 per 1,000.[14] In two decades, from 1970 to 1990, the percentage of married adults decreased from 72 percent to 62 percent. Demographers expect the marriage rate to drop still further in the future.

In addition, consider the dramatic and unprecedented current explosion of out-of-wedlock childbearing. The percent of nonmarital births stood at a fairly insignificant 5.3 percent in 1960; today the number is over 30 percent. Nearly one third of all American children are now born to unmarried parents. Most of those children will live through their childhoods in single-parent, mother-headed households.

A decline in the marriage rate might be good news if it meant that fewer couples would have to endure bad marriages and painful divorces. But this has not happened. While the marriage rate has declined, the divorce rate has climbed to a historically high level — and stayed there. In raw terms, the divorce rate has merely doubled over the past three decades. Yet the probabilities that a marriage will end in divorce have skyrocketed.

Only 14 percent of white women who married in the early 1940s eventually divorced, whereas almost half of white women who married in the late 1960s and early 1970s have already been divorced. For African-American women, the figures are 18 percent and nearly 60 percent. For the average American, the probability that a marriage taking place today will end in divorce or permanent separation is calculated to be a staggering 60 percent.[15]

Again, children are heavily affected. Slightly more than half of divorcing couples in 1988 had children under the age of 18. The odds that a child today will witness the divorce of his or her parents are twice as great as a generation ago. Today, about half of all children in the United States are likely to experience a parental divorce before they leave home. What's more, a sizable percentage of children who now go through one divorce can expect to go through a second and even third divorce, as many of their parents' remarriages also end in divorce.[16] Quite simply, having children is no longer a strong deterrent to divorce.

In a high-divorce society, we become less willing to invest ourselves fully in the institution of marriage. One result is a measurable rise in marital unhappiness.

Marital instability and nonmarriage have thus become dominant characteristics of our era. Consider these facts. In 1960, only 9 percent of all children lived in single-parent families; today, the percentage has increased to 27 percent.[17] More than one third (36 percent) of children today are living apart from their biological fathers, an increase from 17 percent in 1960.[18] Unlike in times past, when the paternal death rate was high, almost all of those fathers are living.

If both childhood experiences and adult risks of marital disruption are taken into account, only a minority of children born today are likely both to grow up in an intact family and also, as adults, form and maintain an intact family. In part because children from broken homes are less likely to form stable marriages of their own, the future for marital stability in America does not look bright.[19]

Moreover, apart from the trends of divorce and nonmarriage, a growing body of evidence suggests that the quality of married life in America has also taken a turn for the worse. Here is one reason why: in a high-divorce society, not only are more unhappy marriages likely to end in divorce, but in addition, more marriages are likely to become unhappy. For in a society where divorce has

become a common and even normative experience, people quite reasonably tend to hedge their bets regarding the durability and even desirability of marriage. We become less willing to invest ourselves fully — our time, resources, dreams, and ultimate commitments — in the institution of marriage. One result is a measurable rise in marital unhappiness.[20]

A Values Shift

The great majority of Americans still say that they believe in marriage as a personal life goal. And they want their own marriage to last a lifetime. But their actual behavior, as this report shows, diverges sharply from these stated beliefs.

In our view, marriage has declined primarily because we no longer value the institution as highly as we once did. Our culture has become increasingly skeptical of marriage and of other institutions as well that are thought to restrict or confine adult behavior. In their place, we now put a much higher value on individualism, choice, and unrestricted personal liberty.

As a result, marriage has been losing its social purpose. Instead of serving as our primary institutional expression of commitment and obligation to others, especially children, marriage has increasingly been reduced to a vehicle — and a fragile vehicle at that — for the emotional fulfillment of adult partners. "Till death us do part" has been replaced by "as long as I am happy." Marriage is now less an institution that one belongs to and more an idea that we insist on bending to our own, quite individualistic, purposes. Fewer than 50 percent of Americans today include "being married" as part of their definition of family values.[21]

Daniel Yankelovich has summarized the cultural changes of recent decades, drawing heavily on survey research data:[22]

> The quest for greater individual choice clashed directly with the obligations and social norms that held families and communities together in earlier years. People came to feel that questions of how to live and with whom to live were a matter of individual choice not to be governed by restrictive norms. As a nation, we came to experience the bonds to marriage, family, children, job, community, and country as constraints that were no longer necessary. Commitments were loosened.

Emotional fulfillment is an important and worthy goal. But it should not be the sole purpose of marriage when children are involved. If marriage is to remain a viable social institution, the self-fulfillment of parents as individuals cannot take precedence over their obligations to children.

A Culture of Divorce

Our nation has largely shifted from a culture of marriage to a culture of divorce. Once we were a nation in which a strong marriage was seen as the best route to achieving the American dream. We have now become a nation in which divorce is commonly seen as the path to personal liberation.

"Till death us do part" has been replaced by "as long as I am happy."

Marriage has come to be regarded as the problem and not the solution. Marriage, so we are told, is restrictive, confining, oppressive, and unliberating. The solution, many of us have come to believe, is the unencumbered life, the life without binding commitments, the life of new beginnings — a life that can often be achieved through divorce. In the recent past, divorce was limited to those marriages which had irreparably broken down, often because one spouse was seriously pathological or incompetent. Today, divorce may occur simply because one partner is unhappy or because a better partner has been located. And given the high rate of divorce, more and more possible partners are continually entering the market.

Divorces that involve children used to be in the category of the shameful, even the unthinkable. Today, children are only a minor inhibitor of divorce, although slightly more so when the children are male rather than female.[23] As one measure of the acceptance of divorce involving children, the proportion of persons who *disagree* with the statement, "when there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don't get along," has jumped from 51 percent in 1962 to a remarkable 82 percent as of 1985.[24]

Many experts argue that, because nothing can be done about it, we should simply accept the culture of divorce

and adjust our other institutions accordingly. Some lawyers instruct people to prepare for the possibility of divorce as part of their preparation for marriage — by drafting, for example, a prenuptial agreement (which states the terms of any later divorce). Marriage therapists, adopting a stance of neutrality and an emphasis on self-actualization, often turn the focus of marriage therapy toward the goal of a "good divorce."

Many textbooks written for use in schools and colleges openly propagandize against any privileged cultural status for marriage and quite often even against marriage itself.

Family court judges often seem more interested in promoting "divorce counseling" than in promoting marriage counseling. We routinely expect stars of the entertainment industry to go through divorces and we rarely learn of their stable, long-term marriages. Policymakers in government, unpersuaded that anything can or even should be done to reverse the basic trend, settle for half-measures aimed at damage control. Instead of fatherhood, child support. Instead of marriage, divorce reform. Instead of parenthood, group homes.

The trend toward a divorce culture is also clearly evident in academic research and writing. Much of the scholarly discourse on family issues conducted over the past three decades has contained a strong anti-marriage bias. Many textbooks written for use in schools and colleges openly propagandize against any privileged cultural status for marriage and quite often even against marriage itself.

We are deeply disturbed by this new culture of divorce. While we certainly recognize that, in individual cases, divorce can sometimes be the least bad solution for a highly troubled marriage, our nation's increasingly casual acceptance of divorce as a normative experience for millions of parents and children should be a cause for profound alarm, not resignation, passivity, and excuse-making.

The American Family Panel

The American Family Panel is an ongoing research project initiated by the Research Board of the Council on Families in America. Conducted through the Center for Social Research and Instruction at Rutgers University, the project is designed to examine the moral ecology of contemporary family life in the U.S. It aims to relate the family values of American parents and spouses to the ways in which those values are implemented on a daily basis and at the major junctures and crisis points in family life. Of special interest is how people deal with the tension between individualism and familism, between self interests and family interests, as they allocate their time, energy, and other resources.

A pilot project was completed in 1993 and generated an abundance of materials that are of value to family researchers. Twenty-five families from various parts of the nation were interviewed five times each. The interviews covered the following areas: family background, gender roles, marriage, parenting, and the family in the larger social context. Each family member interviewed also completed a self-administered questionnaire.

The interviews reveal two phenomena that are highlighted in this report on Marriage in America. One is the tendency of many couples to hold back on marital commitments because of the perceived probability of marital disintegration in our society. The second is an equally strong tendency, found among those couples with stable and long-lasting relationships, to state that the daily stresses and strains of marriage would probably have led to divorce had the ideal of marital permanence not been such an important part of their relationship.

The project directors are David Blankenhorn (Institute for American Values) and Professor David Popenoe (Rutgers University); Professor Norval D. Glenn (University of Texas at Austin) serves as research director; and Professor Ben Zablocki (Rutgers University) was the field director. The members of the Research Board of the Council on Families in America are: Professors David Popenoe (Chair), Norval D. Glenn, Samuel Preston (University of Pennsylvania), Ann Swidler (University of California, Berkeley), and Arland Thornton (University of Michigan). Funding for the initial phase of this project was provided by Professor Don Browning of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago through the Project on Religion, Culture, and Family.

More information and a report on the 25-family pilot project of the American Family Panel, written by Professor Norval D. Glenn, are available from the Institute for American Values.

A Culture of Nonmarriage

We are even more disturbed about another culture that is replacing the culture of marriage — what can be called a culture of nonmarriage. What we mean by the culture of nonmarriage is the growing acceptance of unmarried parents and of having children out of wedlock.

Many Americans may frown on unmarried parenthood in our urban ghettos, where the number of unmarried teen parents has been growing by leaps and bounds. Yet toward the growing phenomenon of unmarried parenthood within the middle class, most Americans, especially younger adults, now refrain from judgement and simply look the other way. Many Americans, in fact, have come virtually to celebrate "single mothers by choice" despite the fact that the vast majority of single mothers live under considerable economic pressure and emotional strain and say, when they are asked, that they would prefer to be a part of a two-parent household.

The explosion of never-married motherhood in our society means that fathers are increasingly viewed as superfluous, unnecessary, and irrelevant. Remarkably, unwed parenthood has now reached virtual parity with divorce as a generator of fatherless homes in the United States.[25]

This growing belief that fathers are superfluous should be a major social concern for our society. First, fathers are vitally important to the task of childrearing. Certainly, we have never met the child who did not say that she or he wanted to be raised by both a father and a mother. And children know whereof they speak. The importance of fathers to childrearing is strongly supported by social science research.[26]

The vast majority of single mothers live under considerable economic pressure and emotional strain and say that they would prefer to be a part of a two-parent household.

Second, it is extremely important to the larger society that men remain involved in family life. For men, married fatherhood is a civilizing force of no mean proportions. Conversely, having a large number of men disconnected from the patterns and satisfactions of family life — and thus much more prone to unhappiness, deviance, and crime — has always, and properly, been one of society's worst fears. In too many of our nation's communities today, this fear is becoming a reality.

The Meaning of Marriage

The enormous importance of marriage for civilized society is perhaps best understood by looking comparatively at human civilizations throughout history. Why is marriage our most universal social institution, found prominently in virtually every known society? Much of the answer lies in the irreplaceable role that marriage plays in childrearing and in generational continuity.

Simply defined, marriage is a relationship within which a community socially approves and encourages sexual intercourse and the birth of children. It is society's way of signalling to would-be parents that their long-term relationship together is socially important — a public concern, not simply a private affair. Kingsley Davis again:

> The genius of [marriage] is that, through it, the society normally holds the biological parents responsible for each other and for their offspring. By identifying children with their parents, and by penalizing people who do not have stable relationships, the social system powerfully motivates individuals to settle into a sexual union and take care of the ensuing offspring.[27]

More broadly, marriage has evolved in Western societies as a complex institution containing at least five dimensions: natural, religious, economic, social, and legal.

- First, marriage has long been viewed as a *natural* institution, meeting and guiding the primary human inclinations toward sexual expression, reproduction, and emotional intimacy. The English political philosopher John Locke describes marriage as humankind's "first Society."[28]
- Second, marriage is a *sacramental* institution, typically built on sacred promises and overseen by religious communities. In most cultures, powerful religious symbols and rites have sought to idealize and sanction the marital relationship.
- Third, marriage is an *economic* institution, constituting a primary unit of economic consumption, exchange, and production.
- Fourth, marriage is a *social* institution, nurturing and

socializing children and regulating the behavior of both husbands and wives. It typically links together two extended families, thus widening the network of support, resources, and obligations available to help children and other vulnerable family members. From this perspective, marriage as an institution can be seen as a seedbed of civic virtue — perhaps society's most important contrivance for protecting child well-being, turning children into good citizens, and fostering good behavior among adults. Primarily for this reason, marriage is widely viewed in human societies as a "social good" worthy of strong support.

- Finally, due to the importance of each of these dimensions, marriage is also a *legal* institution, protected and regulated by a body of law that governs entry into the institution, exit from it, and expectations of behavior within it, including an enumeration of the rights and duties that flow from the status of being married.

One reason that marriage is ubiquitous is that, as a natural institution, it is partially rooted in human biology. The love attachments of marriage are more than just social constructs. Unlike most animals, human males and females have a predisposition to have some emotional affinity for each other beyond the sexual act and to establish "pair bonds."[29]

Accordingly, there exists an "affective attachment" between men and women that causes us to be infatuated with each other, to feel a sense of well-being when we are together with a loved one, and to feel jealous when others attempt to intrude into our relationship. In evolutionary terms, children whose parents cooperate to nurture them to maturity are more likely to survive and reproduce and thus pass along their genes to posterity.

Marriage is society's most important contrivance for protecting child well-being, turning children into good citizens, and fostering good behavior among adults — a "social good" worthy of strong support.

Yet the institution of marriage was designed less for the accommodation of adults in love than for the proper functioning of society, especially regarding the care of children. Indeed, marriage as an institution is historically based on a fundamental realization — that all affective ties between men and women, no matter how biologically based they may be, are notoriously fragile and breakable. Because of this fact, an important aspect of marriage, in both its legal and religious contexts, are the vows of fidelity and permanence that are almost always a part of the wedding ceremony. In large measure, these promises are designed to bind males to long-term commitment in order to foster the social institution of fatherhood.

It is important to add that divorce has also been a common and widespread institution in human societies. In the strict terms of our biological evolution, human beings may not be perfectly suited to monogamous relationships.[30] These values are human accomplishments, not biological givens. Yet in most traditional societies, children of divorce are quickly absorbed into surrounding kinship groups. Those groups are largely absent in modern societies, where families have been reduced to a bare nucleus. Also, the very high level of divorce found in modern societies is not only a historical rarity, but it has commonly been associated with overall social breakdown.

Until quite recently, the concept of illegitimacy has also been virtually ubiquitous. The concept is based on a universal cultural disapproval of casual sexual unions that create a child without married parents and especially a father responsible for it. As the famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski wrote:[31]

Working Papers of the Council on Families in America

The following scholarly papers, along with the essays which will appear in the book *Marriage in America* (see page 20), were commissioned by the Council for its symposia. They are available from the Institute for American Values at $10 apiece.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Noble Failures: A Critical History of Family Commissions*, WP 4, 1991.

Christine Winquist Nord and Nicholas Zill, *American Households in Demographic Perspective*, WP 5, 1991.

William R. Mattox, Jr., *Running on Empty: America's Time-Starved Families with Children*, WP 6, 1991.

Richard T. Gill and T. Grandon Gill, *Of Families, Children, and a Parental Bill of Rights*, WP 33, 1993.

Don S. Browning, *Biology, Ethics, and Narrative in Christian Family Theory*, WP 41, 1993.

Additional Working Papers, commissioned by the Institute, are available upon request.

> In all human societies the father is regarded by tradition as indispensable ... no child should be brought into the world without a man — and one man at that — assuming the role of sociological father, that is, guardian and protector, the male link between the child and the rest of the community.

Dropping the concept of illegitimacy in recent decades is a social and legal change that was well intentioned. Illegitimate children, through no fault of their own, have been highly stigmatized throughout history, and that stigma today has been greatly reduced. But the deeper message of this change is that marriage itself — and thus fatherhood itself — is no longer considered to be essential. And this means, tragically, that many children will suffer and that many men will become estranged from family life, at great social cost.

The Alternatives We Face

By insisting that today's negative trends for children cannot be reversed without strengthening marriage, we realize that many people will regard us as nostalgic and as hopelessly unrealistic. It is now a common view, especially among family scholars and other opinion leaders, that indeed it would be nice if everyone had a strong marriage, but that will never happen. The forces of modernism run against marital permanence; a free society cannot legislate matters of the heart; and in any event, expressive individualism and self-fulfillment are the regnant values of our age that have liberated millions of adults.

In most traditional societies, children of divorce are quickly absorbed into surrounding kinship groups. Those groups are largely absent in modern societies, where families have been reduced to a bare nucleus.

The tide simply cannot be turned, our critics will contend. They might remind us: "Where there is no solution, there is no problem." What we must do, they will insist, is ride with the tide, make the best of it, and design entirely new family solutions for a weak-marriage, high-divorce culture.

The tide against marriage does seem strong, and neither we nor anyone else can accurately predict the future. But nevertheless, and paradoxical though it may sound, we wish to assert that we, not our critics, are the realists. We are the ones, we submit, taking a tough-minded look at social realities. Our proposal is to arrest the downward spiral for children by reinvigorating marriage. This proposal stands a reasonable chance of reversing the current deterioration of child well-being in our society. The laissez-faire acceptance of the decline of marriage is premature and unwarranted. No consistent, widespread effort has been undertaken to try to reverse this trend. Until such an effort is made, it is irresponsible to say that nothing can be done.

The parental relationship is unique in human affairs. In most social relationships, the reciprocity of benefits is carefully monitored, since any imbalance is regarded as exploitative. But in the parental relationship, as has often been pointed out, "the flow of benefits is prolongedly, cumulatively, and ungrudgingly unbalanced."[42]

Pair-bonded biological parents are by far the most willing to make massive, unbalanced investments in children.

Who is willing to make this kind of massive, unbalanced investment in children? Evolutionary biologists tell us that, without question, pair-bonded biological parents are by far the most willing and the most highly motivated to the task. Who are the alternatives? Stepparents and other substitute parents? Peer groups? People especially hired for the task? Public and private childrearing organizations? Orphanages? If parents, especially biological fathers, are increasingly failing at the task of rearing our children, can we really expect these others to rear children successfully?

Other Council Reports

In 1992 the Council on Families in America issued its first report. Addressing the important trend of declining well-being of children in the United States, *Eight Propositions on Family and Child Well-Being* presents a summary of the Council's position on the importance of the family to the welfare of children, to the greater civil society, and to the future of our nation.

Eight Propositions on Family and Child Well-Being (Publication No. WP 21) is available from the Institute at a cost of $5.00.

Let us look closely at the current family policy debate in America. Suppose that all the programs that family-policy advocates now dream of were, in some miraculous way, passed by Congress and signed into law by the President. Suppose that we had full funding for Head Start and for a wide range of family service and preservation programs; extensive parental-leave policies and other work-family policies; larger child tax credits; adoption reform; health care for all children; mandatory paternity identification; and every "deadbeat dad" in the country brought to his knees and made to pay child support.

Surely many of these changes would help. Indeed, we jointly endorse several of these policy ideas, and even more of these proposals are supported by many of the Council members whose names appear below. But by themselves, these policy reforms would do little — indeed, most of them would do almost nothing — to reinstitutionalize marriage and promote marital commitment. And if, for example, the growth of nonmarital births continues to increase at its current rate of 3 or 4 percent each year, could we really expect any or even all of these programs to reverse the current trend?

No amount of public investment in children could possibly offset the private disinvestment that has accompanied the decline of marriage.

We do not underestimate the importance of government programs. But total social spending by all levels of government (in constant 1990 dollars) has risen from $143.73 billion to $787.0 billion over the past three decades — more than a five-fold increase.[33] Total inflation-adjusted spending on welfare has increased 630 percent.[34] Clearly, almost no amount of public investment in children could possibly offset the private disinvestment that has accompanied the decline of marriage.

There is no realistic alternative to the one we propose. We must, as a nation, reassess and change our basic cultural values. The values of marriage and marital permanence must be brought again to center stage.

Recommendations

There *are* some hopeful signs of change. Among marriage and family therapists, for example, we see a modest but potentially important shift toward what one best-selling author-therapist calls "divorce-busting," or asking, as a first obligation of good therapy, "Can this marriage be saved?" In our political discourse, both liberals and conservatives — both former Vice President Dan Quayle and President Bill Clinton — now largely agree that family fragmentation is a major growing threat to our society. There are also some small but hopeful signs that younger Americans are attaching, or at least would like to attach, greater importance than their elders did to the ideals of family life and committed marriage.

So perhaps the tide is already beginning to turn. Perhaps we will have, during the last years of this century, an important and long-overdue public debate in the United States about the possibility of reversing the trend of family fragmentation and reinstitutionalizing marriage.

To encourage this debate, we offer the following goals and recommendations. We offer these with the hope that the coming generation of parents will be able to make better choices than their own parents did. It may be unreasonable to expect a widespread change of heart about marriage among today's adults. We adults have made our decisions; we are all implicated in the current trends. But we remain optimistic about the desire and ability of young Americans to achieve strong and healthy family relationships.

Our message to young Americans is simple and challenging: As a foundation for family life and raising children, marriage is better than its fast-growing alternatives. It is our society's most important institution for bringing up children, for fostering high parental investment in children, and for helping men and women find a common life of mutual affection, care, and sexual intimacy. In your parents' generation, marriage got weaker. The challenge for your generation is to make marriage stronger.

Making marriage stronger will require a fundamental shift in cultural values and in public policy. Toward that end, we propose four broad goals:

1. **Reclaim the ideal of marital permanence and affirm marriage as the preeminent environment for childrearing.**
2. **Decide unequivocally that out-of-wedlock childbearing is wrong, that our divorce rate is far too high, and that every child deserves a father.**

3. **Resolve in the next generation to increase the proportion of children who grow up with their two married parents and decrease the proportion who do not.**
4. **Resolve in the next generation to increase the time that parents spend raising their children. For married couples with children at home, aim for an overall commitment to paid employment that does not exceed 60 hours per week.**

As possible strategies for achieving these goals, we offer the following recommendations. No one sector of society is responsible for the decline of marriage. We are all part of the problem, and therefore we all must be part of the solution. The strategies and recommendations we offer are thus addressed to all major sectors of society.

To religious leaders and organizations:

- Reclaim moral ground from the culture of divorce and nonmarriage. Retrieve and reinterpret inherited marriage symbols and rites. Recover the viewpoint that sees marriage as an institution of covenantal permanence, as the proper context for raising children, and as a relationship of mutual sharing and comfort between husband and wife.
- Avoid the mistake of equating marriage with concepts such as "committed relationships" which have no institutional embodiment. Re-state theologically how the sacramental and covenantal components of marriage are related to its natural, economic, social, and legal components.
- Establish new educational and pastoral programs in seminaries and in congregations designed to promote commitment to marriage, prepare young people for the parental vocation, and uphold the ideal of marital permanence.
- In each local congregation, strive systematically to improve marital satisfaction and to lower rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing. Establish and strengthen premarital counseling and marital enrichment programs. Strive to establish, in your congregation, a culture of marriage and support for marriage. Encourage young people in the congregation to honor, and learn from, older people who model excellence in marriage.
- Reach out, within the congregation and in the surrounding community, to the children of divorce and nonmarriage, offering them care and concrete assistance, while demonstrating by example the value of the marital commitment.
- Create a national Interfaith Council on Marriage devoted to defending and strengthening marriage in America.

To civic leaders and community organizers:

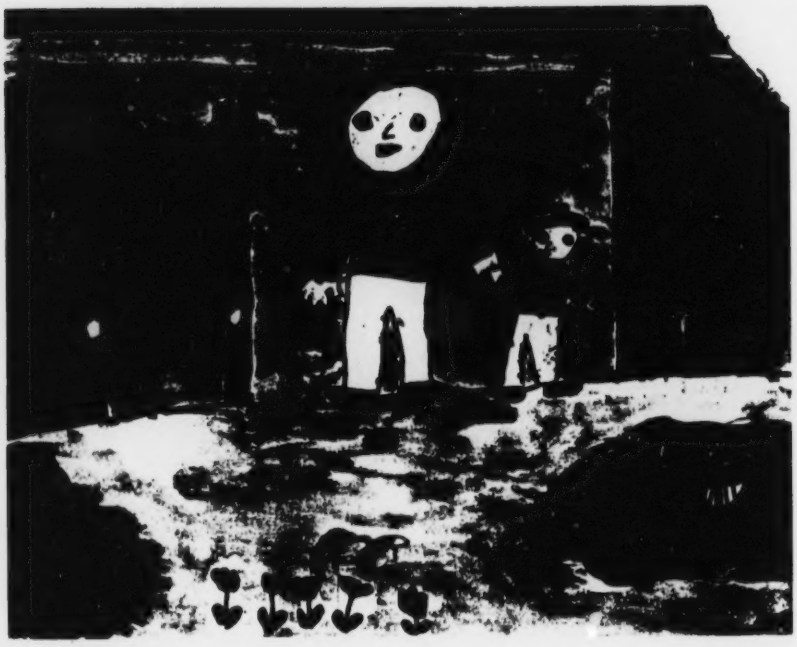
- Form grass-roots social movements designed to protect marriage and family life, not unlike movements today that seek to protect the natural environment.
- Create community-based organizations — from Fathers Clubs to MAD DADS to Boys and Girls Clubs — that model and promote married fatherhood and male responsibility.
- Disseminate information — for example, in schools, religious organizations, libraries, health clinics, and local media — about the personal and social value of marriage.
- Especially in urban America, develop economic strategies aimed at providing more job opportunities for young males, especially poorly educated minority males, since jobless young men are less likely to marry and are less desirable as marriage partners.
- Strive to develop neighborhoods which are stable and supportive of family life. The ecology of safe, child-supportive, and marriage-friendly neighborhoods needs to be protected at least as much as does the ecology of natural environments.

To employers:

- Create personnel policies and work environments that respect and favor the marital commitment.
- Reduce the practice, currently quite common in many large corporations, of continually uprooting and relocating married couples with children.
- Create personnel policies and work environments that permit parents to spend more time with their children, thus helping to reduce the marital stress that accompanies childrearing. Examples include: job protections and other benefits, such as pay and health coverage, for parents wishing to take short-term (up to six months) parental leaves; job preferences and other benefits, such as graduated re-entry, for parents wishing to take longer-term (up to five years) parental leaves; and opportunities for job-sharing, compressed work weeks, career breaks, and working at home.

To social work, health care, and other human service professionals:

- Within the limits of good clinical practice, promote a culture of family formation and treat individuals as



Left:

Images of Father/Mother

This is about me and my father.
We went to the park to look at the ducks and the flowers.
I felt Great.
E.B., boy, 6th grade (special ed.), Brooklyn

much as possible in the context of families.

- Within the limits of good clinical practice, discourage unwed childbearing and assume that marriage is optimal for childrearing.
- Examine the ways in which current policies and models of service delivery either explicitly or implicitly undermine marriage formation and marriage stability.
- Reassess professional training and continuing education curricula, seeking to increase professional knowledge of the benefits and responsibilities of marriage, the predictable stages and crisis points in marriage, and the most effective support and treatment programs available to married couples.

To marriage counselors, family therapists, and family life educators:

- Begin with a bias in favor of marriage. Stress the needs of the marriage at least as much as the needs of the client.
- Help couples identify the likely pressure points in a marriage, such as the birth of the first child, and guide them toward the steps that can help their marriage to thrive.

To pregnancy health care providers and counselors:

- Tell young people unequivocally that every child deserves to grow up with two married parents.
- For every pregnancy, insist upon paternal identification — not simply for the purpose of child support payments, but for the purposes of fatherhood and, whenever possible, marriage. Establish community outreach programs to involve fathers in caring for their children and the mothers of their children, knowing that the reason to strengthen the paternal role is to foster marriage, not to foster substitutes for marriage.
- Encourage unmarried teenage mothers to give up their children for adoption by married couples.

To family law attorneys and judges:

- Strive to find ways to minimize unnecessary conflict in family disputes. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "Be peacemakers among neighbors whenever you can."
- Reassess current trends in family law, in such areas as child custody, adoption, and divorce, with an eye toward promoting marital and childrearing stability.

To children's advocates:

- Link advocacy for children to advocacy for marriage. While advocating better programs for children, also insist that no children's program, however well-funded and well-designed, can or ought to substitute for a stably married two-parent home.
- Organize grass-roots consumer boycotts of corporations whose advertisements or entertainment products (such as movies, music, or television shows) celebrate sexual violence and degrade the marital relationship.

To teachers, principals, and leaders in education:

- Eliminate the implicit and frequently explicit anti-marriage bias currently prevalent in many school curricula.
- Develop better procedures whereby parents can be informed about, and have some input into, what teachers are teaching children about marriage, procreation, and family life.
- Promote education for successful marriage as a regular part of school curricula. Include understanding of the historical roots of marriage, its desirability as an environment for childrearing, and its psychological, moral, legal, and economic requirements.

To foundation executives and philanthropic leaders:

- For every grant or charitable gift aimed at ameliorating the harmful impact of family fragmentation on children and on society, offer another aimed at strengthening marriage.
- Encourage objective research on marriage — what it is, how it works, and how it can be made to work better. (We have yet to find the word "marriage" in any leading foundation index.)

To family scholars:

- Re-write educational textbooks and family life education curricula so that marriage-with-children is portrayed as a desirable social good rather than as just one of many equally viable lifestyle alternatives.
- In educational textbooks and in other scholarly work, treat marriage as a basic societal institution with many dimensions — natural, legal, moral-religious, economic, and social — rather than examining marriage only, or mainly, from a psychological or therapeutic perspective.
- Undertake rigorous new research into the structure and experience of marriage — what makes it work, what makes it vulnerable, how it can be strengthened.[39]

To print and broadcast media journalists and editors:

- Encourage journalism on marriage and family life as a professional speciality and as a track for advancement.
- Examine the successes of marriage at least as often as its pathologies.
- Guard against widely circulated statistics which distort the realities of the marital institution and of family life.
- For editors of popular magazines aimed at teenage girls and teenage boys, realize that many teenagers are intensely interested in thinking about the kind of person they might marry, and that they would enjoy and benefit from good articles about marriage.
- Spend more time talking to ordinary families about family life today.

To entertainment industry writers, producers, and executives:

- Don't glamorize unwed motherhood, marital infidelity, alternative lifestyles, and sexual promiscuity. Imagine depicting divorce and unwed childbearing as frequently and as approvingly as you currently depict smoking and littering.
- Examine the ramifications of what happens every day on almost all daytime television talk shows regarding issues of sexuality and marriage. Do these sensationalistic stories accurately reflect the consequences of the behavior being described?
- Regarding a great deal of "gangsta" rap and other music for young people that celebrates sexual violence and is steeped in a predatory view of the male-female relationship, reconsider the popularization of these products. Balance commercial success with a sense of responsibility to the wider community of which you are a part.

To local, state, and federal legislators:

- Reconsider state marriage laws that lean toward "no-fault" divorce. Consider revisions that would emphasize the social importance of marriage, especially when children are involved, and that would shift the support of the law toward the marital partner trying to save the marriage.
- Formulate "vision statements" that publicly establish the goal of strengthening the married, two-parent home and decreasing the number of children born to unmarried parents.
- Revise the federal tax code to eliminate the "marriage penalty" and to provide more favorable treatment for married couples with children. Ideas with merit include:
  - Increase the value of the personal income tax exemption by a factor of three or four, restoring the value lost to inflation during the years 1960-1990; and in addition, permit parents to claim a

larger exemption for years in which a child is born or adopted.

- Create a new, universal $1,000 per child refundable tax credit (as recommended by the National Commission on Children) as a partial substitute for means-tested programs that tend to disfavor married-couple families with children.

- Create new educational credits or vouchers, to be used for high school, vocational, college, graduate, or post-graduate education, available to parents who leave the paid labor force for a period of time to care for their young children.
- Replace the current welfare system with new anti-poverty approaches in which unwed motherhood is discouraged and in which marriage and the family are empowered rather than denigrated. Ideas with merit include:
  - Mandatory identification of fathers prior to the receipt of benefits, linked to pro-marriage incentives, such as favorable tax and housing treatment;
  - Encouragement toward the placement in adoptive, married-couple homes of babies born to unmarried teenage mothers;
  - The substitution of a universal, refundable child-tax credit, or child allowance, for existing means-tested benefits;
  - The creation of a bias in favor of marriages-with-children in the allocation of subsidized housing loans and public housing; and
  - As a partial replacement for the existing system, the creation of a poverty tax credit, through which taxpayers could directly allocate a portion of their tax payments to one or more non-profit, community-based organizations devoted to reducing child poverty and strengthening families.
- Fundamentally reassess the current state-federal child support enforcement program, seeking whenever possible to foster not simply more child support but also more marriage and more fatherhood. Expecting child support payments in the absence of committed fatherhood is an elusive — and probably ultimately futile — goal.
- Create and disseminate for public discussion an annual measurement of our nation's marital health — an index of family strength based on such statistics as the following: percent of adults married, percent of first marriages intact, percent of births to married parents, percent of children living with their natural, married parents, and percent of children living with two married parents.

Perhaps we will have, during the last years of this century, an important and long-overdue public debate in the United States about the possibility of reversing the trend of family fragmentation and reinstitutionalizing marriage.

To the general public:

- All of us need to consider ways in which we as individuals, on a daily basis, can demonstrate support for the marriages in which we are involved, as spouse, parent, child, or other relative.

Conclusion

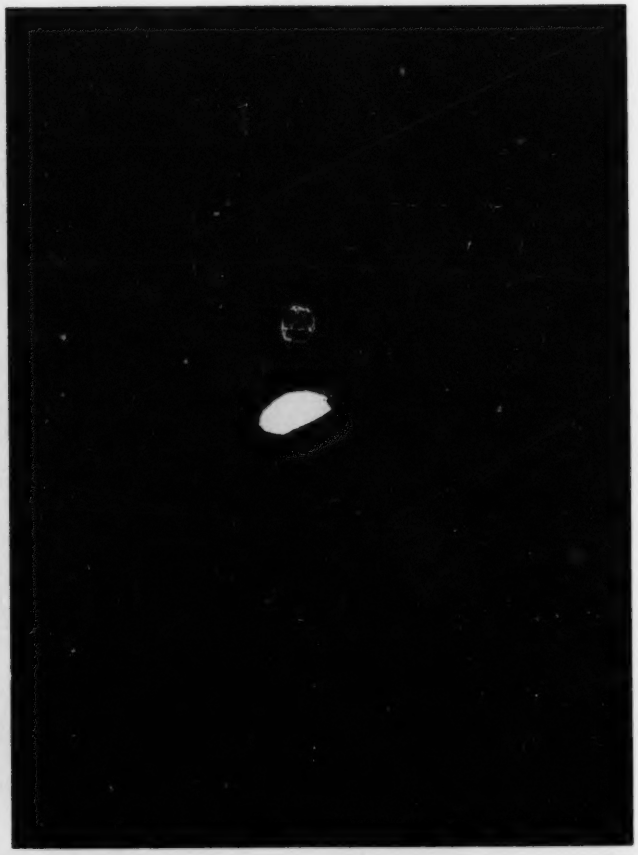
We offer these ideas to the American public and especially to society's leaders who have the capacity and responsibility to strengthen marriage for a new generation of Americans. These recommendations are preliminary and imperfect and are certainly not the last word on the subject. Indeed we hope this report will constitute the first round — an opening statement — in what we believe will be a new national debate about how to strengthen the essential institutions of marriage and the family. In our view, no domestic challenge of our era is more important than this one.

Right:

Father's Cherishment for His Son

If I was a father, I would spend most of my time with my son. If he has any problems, I will be there to help him. If he is sad or depressed, I will comfort him. I would take him to parks and recreational centers. I would bring him to Great Adventure and other places that are fun. I will ensure that my son receives a proper education. I will help him in his homework and explain to him what he doesn't understand. I will show all my love and affection.

E.X., boy, 9th grade, New York



Left:

A Mother

Being a mother
must be hard but
no matter how hard
Mothers always help
their children and
a mother is loving
your children.

L.B., boy, 8th grade, New York

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Right:

Mom! I Am Not a Child Anymore

I'm already sixteen,
but I'm treated as a child.
When I'm out with a guy
my mom gets angry and wild.
She just wants him
away from her little baby,
who's already a woman
and knows more than her
mommy and daddy.

B.S., girl, 10th grade, Brooklyn

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33 William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), p. i.

34 *Ibid.*, p. i.

35 See, for example, a forthcoming book by one of our Council members: Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995).

FORTHCOMING BOOK

Marriage in America

Papers presented to the Council on Families in America in their deliberations on marriage will be published in book form by Rowman & Littlefield in the fall of 1995. **Marriage in America** presents the work of family scholars and experts in a wide range of fields. The status and future of marriage are approached from sociological, demographic, legal, philosophical, and economic perspectives.

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A Family Outing at the Amusement Park

This is a happy picture in an amusement park, with all kinds of rides like the roller coaster and the sky rocket and the ferris wheel. This is the kind of family I want to have when I grow up. I'm in the middle in the orange shirt, my father is on my right, and my two uncles on my left. The three guys in the back are their three sons who are going to get some food. My father and his brothers are very close and love to do things together, with their children. I hope when I grow up I can be very close with all my relatives.

T.B., boy, 7th grade, Bronx

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